

VaEtchanan - Drasha Post-Torah Service

לֹא אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ כָּרַת יְהוָה אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אֲתֵנוּ אֲנֹחֶנוּ אֱלֹהֵי כֹּה הַיּוֹם כָּלְנוּ חַיִּים:

“Not with our parents did G-d craft this covenant, but rather with us, *us*, these ones who are here today, living.”

With these words, Moshe Rabbeinu urges the people of Israel to take seriously their responsibility to uphold our people’s covenant with G-d. The rhetorical language is powerful. However, ostensibly, what he says is false - it is counterfactual.

Other than Joshua and Caleb, everyone who was an adult at Mt. Sinai died during the years of sojourning in the wilderness. So, what does Moshe mean when he says this to the people? And, perhaps more importantly, we should ask this question which we should ask of every sacred text: How can *we* who are here today read these words in a way that is honest and authentic for us?

Rashi resolves this apparent problem in a simple way by saying: not *only* did G-d make this covenant with our ancestors, but also with us. Surely, we believe this to be true, that our Jewish tradition is transmitted from generation to generation otherwise we would not be here, holding fast to Jewish tradition in community on Shabbat morning. But, the early modern Moroccan commentator on the Torah Rabbi Hayyim ibn Attar is unsatisfied with Rashi’s answer. This is obvious! - He objects. There must be something more communicated by this emphasis on the fact that the living generation is responsible for the covenant.

But, what more is communicated?

This morning, I would like to claim that this verse can reveal for us the roots of our inherited Jewish faith in the mystical power of reading and learning.

Many of us think of Jews as book-ish. We are after all known as “the people of the book” - and were even formally referred to by this title in the Quran. When we look around at our American Jewish community, we can see that we are overrepresented in academia and other professions that require higher learning. We might think this is just part of Jewish culture and has always been.

However, it is the book of Devarim which first asserts a vision of Judaism that centers learning and reading in Jewish life and practice. The Hebrew root L-M-D which means learn and is in the center of *Talmud* and *Limmud* is entirely absent from the first 4 books of the Torah. In Genesis through Numbers, LaMaD does not appear once. In contrast, in the book of Devarim this root appears 16 times! This presence of this mitzvah of Talmud Torah - learning Torah - which is expressed by this root and others fills the book of Devarim!

If we take a step back and pay attention to how we daven together in shul, - how we pray traditionally in synagogue - we will see that it is all about reading and learning. We pray from prayer books that are filled with biblical verses and prayer poetry authored over many generations and the center of our service is the Torah service where we remove an old-school kind of book - a scroll written on parchment - and read from it to the entire community! Reading and learning is at the center of our worship.

In general, to many of us, reading seems like a commonplace activity, even an unconscious process. Every day, I glance at a sign or advertisement and read its words without even thinking about it. Yet, in the era of sefer Devarim - our tradition's emphasis on reading and learning was radical! Millenia before the term literacy was coined, our ancestors embraced religious practices founded on the importance of reading.

As we see in several passages in our parsha, In Sefer Devarim this perspective extends to a broader emphasis on auditory and oral experience over visual experience. We are told to listen and to tell and commanded not to create any visual likeness of any kind of creature. This is demanding. Reading often takes effort and is

always precipitated on having been taught an entire alphabet and system of meaning-making. It is tempting to simply opt for a visual experience instead. I know that it is not an uncommon experience for me to turn on the T.V or netflix in the evening rather than cracking open a book. I imagine some of you share that experience.

Yet, our tradition has long emphasized reading. Since antiquity, as recorded in the Mishnah, our rabbis taught that it was an obligation to teach every boy to read Hebrew. And though this may seem like a small accomplishment in our modern eyes, it is worth noting that some early rabbis even argued for teaching every girl to read as well! According to all early rabbinic opinions, each individual Jew is responsible for reading (or reciting from memory) at least one passage from the Torah every morning and evening: The Shema. In fact, this reading practice seems to have been commonplace even generations before the flourishing of the early rabbinic movement.

So, Jews love reading and learning and have made these actions central to our individual and communal spiritual practice since antiquity. But, why? What is so important about this mode of engagement and interaction?

To explore this question in greater depth, you can join us on Wednesday evenings in August for my class on the fundamentals of Jewish prayer where one session will focus on ritualized reading and recitation.

For now, I would like to focus on the 2 verses from our parsha which we echo whenever we read from the sefer Torah.

וְזָאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָי בְּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

We read this verse at the end of our first aliyah, after Moshe recounted the laws of cities of refuge which provide an opportunity for accidental killers to avoid the extra-judicial vengeance of their victim's families. Here, in its biblical context, it seems like the word "Torah" refers to a specific instruction - this is the guidance that Moses gave.

Yet, we sing this verse as we lift our entire Torah scroll and we point and declare: this is the Torah that Moses gave to the children of Israel!"

Of course, on one level, this is not true - it is counterfactual. This Torah scroll was written by a human sofer - a scribe - in recent history, not delivered by Moses. Yet, when we say this verse we assert our continuity with the past generations of Jews all the way to the experience of revelation at Sinai.

Our Torah *is* the same ancient Torah and whenever we read Torah together we are transported momentarily back to the foot of Sinai - or in this case to the border of the land of Israel where Moses spoke to the people.

This - I want to suggest - is the radical, mystical vision of our tradition's devotion to reading. When we read Torah, Midrash, Talmud, or later words which were spoken by previous generations of Jews, our souls are joined with theirs. When our lips mirror the movements of their lips, our spirits are transported through time and space to the very experiences to which their words gave voice.

In the words of two talmudic sages, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai in the name of Rabbi Yohanan:

"כל תלמיד חכם שאומרים דבר שמועה מפיו בעולם הזה - שפתיו דובבות בקבר"

Every wise student who we speak the words of their mouth in this world - their lives tremble in the grave.

When we stood together a few minutes ago and heard the reading of the 10 Commandments, just like when the younger generation of the children of Israel stood on the border of the land and heard Moshe read to them the 10 commandments, we all tasted spiritually the experience of our ancestors who physically stood at har Sinai and heard voice of G-d through thunder.

The second verse of our parsha which is echoed in our Torah service makes this idea more clear. After recounting the incidents of idolatry at baal peor which left hundreds of Israelites dead by plague, Mose declares:

אַתֶּם הַדֹּבְלִים בִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים כְּלַכֶּם הַיּוֹם:

But you who hold tight to Hashem your G-d - all of you are alive today.

We say this verse just as we begin to read the Torah, when the Gabbai introduces the reading of the Torah. Through doing so, we reenact this moment from our parsha. It is as if we say “all of you who are sitting here together in this sanctuary, alive - we are the ones who hold tight to Hashem Our G-d as we hear the voice of Divine revelation speaking as we read from the Torah scroll.”

To paraphrase our parsha:

What other people is so fortunate to have such life-giving practices!

Not with our ancestors was this covenant made, but rather with all of us here, alive today.

Ashreinu - let's be glad - and - Aleinu - It is upon us - to study and listen, to uphold our covenantal tradition - and through doing so - to honor and to resurrect the experiences of our ancestors.

In that spirit, we turn now to prepare for the Musaf Amidah - to raise our voices in prayer and praise together with those of the countless generations of Jews before us who celebrated Shabbat with song and prayer.